

Timothy Snyder's Limited Vision of Unity

A Comment

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In a recent issue of the *New York Review of Books*, a lecture by Timothy Snyder of Yale University was reprinted under the title "Holocaust: The Ignored Reality". Clearly, the title, as well as the prominence accorded to this article, based on a lecture given in Riga earlier this year, suggests a new model for interpreting the Holocaust as well as all that went on in Eastern Europe during World War Two. Consulting Professor Snyder's website, we see that the lecture contains what will apparently be the main thesis of his forthcoming book, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* to be published late next year, and which will be followed by another large historical synthesis, *Brotherlands* its title suggesting that it show the bands of similarity and shared heritage among Germans, Poles, and East European Jews.

While we are always happy to entertain new theses concerning the Second World War, the Holocaust, and East European history generally, we would prefer to see such treatments be both accurate and methodologically and conceptually sound. If the forthcoming books, however, are as deficient as this article, then the books will be both incomplete and inaccurate. We offer these remarks, therefore, in the hopes that the finished product will have greater nuance than we have seen here.

Snyder's basic thesis is that millions, if not tens of millions, of people perished or were put to death in the region between the Bug and Volga rivers, with Belarus at the center of destruction, and that these people perished largely because of competition between Germany and Russia over the area's economic resources (chiefly agricultural), and that this is the larger context, or the "ignored" context, of the Jewish Holocaust.

In other writings, Snyder makes it clear that his understanding of the Holocaust is much more sensitive to detail and subtlety than most Holocaust historians provide. He recognizes that the persecution, death, and mass murder of Jews was due to a large variety of factors, including inter-group competition, Jewish involvement with communism, and even competition among Jews, as in terms of the Jewish police forces in the ghettos that enforced the confinement, deportations, and deaths of their co-religionists.

In the present article, however, while making a proper distinction about the inaccurate designation of Auschwitz as the demographic center of the Holocaust, and while correctly noting that the main Jewish victims were the *Ostjuden*, that is, Ashkenazi Jews who had not been assimilated into either West European, German or Hungarian cultures, he then goes on to repeat without examination the now fashionable thesis concerning the Reinhardt camps in which he argues that 1.3 million people were killed at these Bug river camps by the end of 1942.

The source of this particular interpretation with regard to Aktion Reinhardt is due to the short article by Peter Tyas and Stephen Witte published in 2001, and based on the discovery of the now well-known "Hoefle telegram" among the Enigma decrypts that were de-classified in Britain in the 1990's. The telegram clearly indicates the number of Jews sent to the Bug river camps, by the end of December, 1942, as 1.274 million. This number also neatly ties into the total in the Korherr report, long known,

which states that 1.274 million Jews had been sifted through the camps of the Government General of Poland by that date. Therefore we know the Hoefle telegram is accurate, that it independently ties in with another official document, and we also know, according to Korherr, that these people are included in the number of 1.5 million transported “from the eastern camps to the Russian east.”

The problem is that everyone consulting this document – from mainstream Holocaust historians to David Irving – assumes that all of these people were killed by December, 1942. Yet this is simply impossible. First, because the ghettos in the Russian East continued to grow and function even after this time, and so did the various forced labor industries that the Germans used to employ these Jewish deportees, including Organization Todt, which among other projects was involved in precisely the road-building in the Soviet Union that was specified in the minutes of the Wannsee Conference.

The second reason why this calculation is impossible is because, even if we were to assume that these people perished by the end of the war – not an unreasonable proposition – there is no way in which they could have been killed and buried in the three Bug river camps as usually described, even with the *deus ex machina* of the fabled engine exhaust gas chambers. There simply was not enough space, nor time.

In this respect we note that Snyder’s article contains a map which pinpoints the Bug river camps – Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka – and includes as well some Soviet killing sites, for example, Katyn, Bykivnia, and Kuropaty. We might ask what forensics has determined about these death sites, and we notice a distinct contrast. Katyn, for example, contains the remains of about 4,400 Poles, according to a meticulous body count carried out by the Germans in 1943. The mass graves at Bykivnia and Kuropaty, on the other hand, which have only recently received the attention they deserve, contain, according to actual forensics, about 30,000 to 50,000 bodies apiece, although the initial estimates were ten times higher. These two sites, however, are enormous, especially compared to the Bug river sites where the number of victims are alleged as being ten, or even twenty times higher, figures that are supported nowhere outside of the Hoefle telegram, and figures which are not even supported by the forensic analyses at these sites.

Sadly, once again, we see the Jewish Holocaust reduced to large numbers in small places, and usually for ideological rather than historical purposes, such that millions of Jewish lives are written off the ledger and ascribed to a simplistic calculation of Nazi, and then German, evil. A deeper analysis of the vicissitudes of the suffering of the Jewish people in Eastern Europe appears to be not only beyond Professor Snyder’s ken, it remains so for all Holocaust historians.

However the most glaring problem with Snyder’s analysis concerns the methods used to arrive at his death totals, a problem that is particularly disadvantageous to the Germans. There are basically two ways one can count the victims of 20th Century European history: one is by a simple body count, and the other is by various population balance methods. Population balance methods, in turn, depend on the accuracy of census data, both in its reporting and its tabulation, a rarity in Eastern European history. In addition, more sophisticated methods, such as the technique of calculated “excess deaths” produce results that are heavily dependent on the integrity and consistency of the underlying statistical assumptions.

It goes without saying that most of the death totals in Eastern Europe in the 20th Century are achieved by population balance methods; the records are often unavailable, corrupt or incomplete, and hard to

interpret. As a result population balance methods are normally used in the following manner: if some area had, say, 500,000 persons of X group, but, 20 years later, only 10,000, then the population balance method arrives at a figure of 490,000 deaths. (I am omitting here the issue of excess deaths due to assumed birth over death rates, or other part-to-whole extrapolation techniques.)

Snyder relies on these estimates extensively. For example, his overall Holocaust death toll among Jews is entirely based on this methodology. (On the other hand, his reliance on the Tyas-Witte decode, and Einsatzgruppen reports, is an example of body count methods, which goes to show that even these methods raise questions.) On the subject of the Holodomor, Snyder uses a total of three million, which is derived, as are all figures on the Ukrainian famine, from population balance methods, and then goes on to rebuke the Ukrainian president for claiming ten million victims of the Soviet induced famines, a total, however, which is also based on population balance methods. In this way, Professor Snyder arrogates to himself an authority on statistical methodology that certainly deserves greater analysis than that given here. Yet the wide variance of numbers among estimates for the Ukrainian famine simply underscores how inexact and imprecise population balance methods can be.

However, when it comes to the German civilian deaths in Eastern Europe, Snyder eschews population balances and suddenly reverts to the body count method, deriving, in this way, a low total of fatalities for the German expulsions of only 600,000. True, Snyder makes a gratuitous and politically correct nod in the direction of the German women raped by the Red Army, but his treatment of German loss of life is for the most part bracketed off into a sidebar, and diminished in every way possible: blamed on Hitler (because he failed to evacuate these people; by which logic the Siege of Leningrad was Stalin's fault, but, never mind), blamed on aggressive war that began in Germany, and altogether described as a mere accident of history. On the other hand, had Snyder used the same population balance methods he uses for everyone else, he could have easily achieved total German deaths from the expulsions at over two million.

Snyder's treatment of the German Question might easily be seen as typical 20th Century Germanophobia, but it is not. Rather, he is leaving the Germans out of the picture because they don't fit in with his thesis, because the main thrust of his article is to promote Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia as equal millstones in the grinding down of all of the peoples who lay between. To a certain extent there is merit to this thesis, and it is not unknown in revisionist circles.

However, there are four elements that weaken Snyder's presentation. First is the time element: he wants to show two totalitarian regimes fighting over Eastern Europe for the purpose of controlling food production and thereby achieving economic autarky, so he limits himself to the 1930's and 1940's. But the struggle over Eastern Europe goes back much farther than that, and in the 19th Century involved not merely the securing of excess food supplies on which industrialization and modern prosperity could be built but also under whose auspices and control the necessary bureaucratic and civil infrastructure would be constructed. This is essentially the source of modern nationalism in this region.

By expanding the time frame just to the beginning of the 20th Century, Snyder could have gained a greater insight into the turmoil of the region, as well as the degree to which it was due, not so much to German and Russian economic competition, but to intergroup competition among many groups. He also could include, in this way, the large number of deaths due to the First World War, since the large battles of movement that took place here (Tannenberg, Gorlice-Tarnow, Lemberg, Brusilov Offensive) cost hundreds of thousands of lives, not to mention the Russian Civil War, the Polish invasion of the fledgling

Soviet Union, and the post-First World War famines and typhus epidemics. These together probably cost many millions, perhaps tens of millions, of lives. Of course, we already know why Snyder does not include these things: as with the plight of the Germans, these killings underscore the degree to which competition and mass death in the region was not a function of totalitarian ideologies as much as group competition pure and simple, of which the German and Russian variants were merely the most powerful. In other words, these complexities are ignored because they would weaken the overall thesis.

A second point is related to the first, because Snyder in his wish to portray the German and Russian peoples as perpetrators conjures much anachronistic nationalism in the region. In the 21st Century, all people of good will are amenable to the idea of self-determination of nationalities. Thus we may speak of Lithuanian, Latvian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian nationalities, or even Palestinian, Rusyn, Moldovan, or Lipka nationalities. But none of these things existed in any meaningful way 150 years ago, and many did not exist in any meaningful way until World War Two or thereafter. Therefore to promote Belarusians as somehow a distinct ethnic group from the Great Russians from who they, and their language, are practically indistinguishable, and during the examined period, is seriously anachronistic and makes for bad history. Indeed, "Byelorussia" as a distinct entity only came into existence in 1918, as a result of Germany's conquest of the region and the Bolshevik Revolution the previous fall.

Snyder's emphasis on Belarus as a distinct nation is also strongly at odds with the actual "pre-nationalist" mentality of Eastern Europe's social structure through most of its history. The triumph of nationalism, and nationalist historiography, tends to blind us to the fact that indeed most of European history is impossible to understand or explain by recourse to mere nationalist categories. Particularly in the East, the social structure was highly mixed, involving layer upon layer of communities that had evolved historically and which were neither unified nor permeable. The top tiers were normally dominated by the old nobilities: Poles, Germans, Russians, Balts, Hungarians. The middle tiers were occupied mostly by German or Jewish merchants, the latter whose native dialect, Yiddish, is similar.

Only under these various layers did one find the local peasantry, who spoke the various languages and dialects from which the nationalist movements arose, and whose population growth and urban migration provided the push and the urgency of nationalism (it also provided the background to the creation of Esperanto and other artificial universal languages.)

This historical cross section of populations in Eastern Europe, however, underlines another defect of Snyder, which is his confusion of absence by mass murder to the more basic mere absence of ethnic diversity. In other words, at the beginning of the 20th Century there were large Polish, German, and Jewish populations scattered throughout the region. These people were, simply by their typically noble or bourgeois status, the engine of change and the bearers of urban culture in the region. But by 1950, all of these people, whether by flight, assimilation, or mass murder, had disappeared, except to those states to which they had been assigned or had found refuge. These population dynamics, in an ethnic or cultural sense, have much more to do with the history, including the subsequent history, of the region, than mere body counts.

A fourth problem is that in his recitation of body counts Snyder is opening the door to endless mutual grievance. Setting aside German losses could have been one such source of criticism, however, Germany severely criminalizes any revanchism, so we can expect no repercussions there. However, already Snyder's article has fostered a "me too" response from representatives of the Belarusian and Romany communities, and we can look forward to more clamoring for victim status in the future. Moving Eastern

Europeans away from the destructiveness of their recent past may be partly served by recognizing their common grave of suffering, but to the extent that such recognition panders to nationalist sentiment, as Snyder's article does, it only encourages the parochialism of the past.

Towards the end of his lecture, Professor Snyder invokes "the need for an ethical commitment to the individual" as a protection against faceless state policies that lead to mass death. On this point, I completely concur. Yet shortly before this, he notes that his minimizing of Great Russian deaths could, according to pending legislation in Russia, be, at some point, a criminal offense.

In this respect, Snyder seems to have a blind eye to the fact that criminalizing historical interpretations of any kind violates precisely the ethical commitment to the individual that can only be the font and origin of human rights. And he also ignores the fact that in several European countries – Poland, Germany, France, and others – alternative interpretations of precisely some of the subjects of his talk are criminalized, enforced in a draconian fashion, and often lead to debilitating fines and lengthy prison terms. Unless Professor Snyder can bring himself to recognize that such dignity that he prizes should be extended even to Holocaust revisionists, his concluding encomium to human rights must be seen as flaccid and incomplete.

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